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## *PETITIONERS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS: THE LOST GENERATION OF THE 1920s*

The history written on the early years of the Soviet Union has changed focus in the past few decades. Instead of concentrating on high politics and the struggle for succession to the leadership of the Communist Party, scholars in the West have increasingly addressed the everyday life of average citizens, how they viewed and shaped the communist experiment, and how Soviet leaders responded to and attempted to mold popular views.<sup>1</sup> Postcommunist studies concentrating on party politics and Soviet society at the grassroots level have shown that in the formative years of the Soviet Union, the division between leaders and led was less pronounced than had previously been as-

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1. One line of revisionist historiography on the Soviet Union idealizes the NEP period and is based not merely in the desire to reveal Russia's lost chances (see Robert Tucker's summation of a conference of Russian and American scholars held in Moscow in 1989 which focused on "[t]he question of *alternativnost*", the possible 1920s alternatives to the course history actually took in the 1930s" ["Soviet History in the 1920s," *Slavic Review* 50, no. 2 (summer 1991): 239-40]), but also in a traditional conception of how history happens. Traditional interpretations see the political, economic, and social transformation of the Soviet Union that began in the late 1920s as a revolution from above (an assertion made by Stalin himself). Another line challenges center-based interpretations of the Soviet period or, as Stephen Cohen put it, "explaining complex historical and social developments by high politics" (Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985], 22). J. Arch Getty criticized the "Westernizing approach," which "discourages locating historical problems or evils lower down in the apparatus and [thus has] little interest in emphasizing unseemly social problems like class conflict, specialist baiting, populist hostility toward the intelligentsia, or wage and status conflicts" ("The Politics of Stalinism," *The Stalin Phenomenon*, ed. Alec Nove [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993], 114-15). Getty also remarked on the gap of experience and understanding between "educated, comfortable people" and "those at the bottom of society" that affects both history and historical analysis ("The Politics of Stalinism," 116). A useful appraisal of post-Soviet historiography in both the former Soviet Union and the West is Alter Litvin and John Keep, eds., *Stalinism: Russian and Western Views at the Turn of the Millennium* (London: Routledge, 2005), in which the editors note that, while Russian scholarship has concentrated since the 1990s mainly on publishing documentary collections and assessment of the Stalinist legacy, Western scholarship, especially concerning social history and the foundations of the Soviet state, has focused primarily on the 1930s, that is, after the Stalinist system was already in place. In contrast, the 1920s – when the Soviet system was being formed – are relatively unstudied.

sumed.<sup>2</sup> Continuing this scholarly trend, this essay examines the connection between high politics and the society at large by focusing on an important aspect of 1920s politics and society: the lost generation, those left out in the changes wrought by the NEP.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, this study aims to shed light on how discontent and militancy may have contributed to the Stalinist “Great Turn” at the end of the decade by examining the messages sent to the central government in the mid-1920s during the struggle for power and direction among top party leaders.<sup>4</sup> Appeals on which this work is based were directed

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2 In her study of the messages and values imbedded in workers’ essays on factory directors submitted to a *Pravda* contest during 1922 (“Factory Tales: Narratives of Industrial Relations in the Transition to NEP,” *Russian Review* 55, no. 3 [July 1996]: 384-411), Diane Koenker observed that “[t]hese narratives . . . helped to construct an operative language of industrial relations in this liminal period of the definition of socialism” (386), and that, in the process of negotiation and communication carried out through such contests and similar venues, “[t]here came to be no clear demarcation between ‘official’ values and ‘authentic’ values, for each influenced the other” (407). On the blurring of “above” and “below” in the process of sovietization, see also Michael S. Fox, “Political Culture, Purges, and Proletarianization at the Institute of Red Professors, 1921-1929,” *Russian Review*, 52, no. 1 (Jan. 1993): 20-42. In a recent study on the Rabsel’kor movement in the 1920s (“From Conduits to Commanders: Shifting Views of Worker Correspondents,” *Revolutionary Russia* 19, no. 2 [Dec. 2006]: 131-49), Jeremy Hicks noted the gradual shift in the Rabsel’kors’ role and relationship to the party toward Stalin’s desire for greater control: “the power of the worker correspondents to scrutinize abuses by Party members was gradually eroded and then put an end to altogether when they were placed under the control of local Party bureaux in August 1926” (135). But Hicks also noted that the call for greater control came in part from “the floor” at the Second Rabsel’kor Conference, in order to protect the correspondents (140). In another study in the same volume (“Class Ascription and Class Identity: *Komsomol’sy* and the Policy of Class during Nep,” 175-96), Matthias Neumann noted that during NEP, the “process of becoming aware of class fragmentation and class conflict in society was mutually driven by the political discourse from above, though not always intentionally, and through experience, traditions, expectations and autonomous discourses from below” (190).

3. This article is based on a wider study on the themes of popular discontent in the 1920s: “Permanent Revolution: A Study of the Early Soviet State,” Minnesota Mediterranean and East European Monographs (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, Modern Greek Studies, forthcoming).

4. Some notable studies that have focused on discontent during NEP, particularly among key groups, include Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1934* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), one of the pioneering works in the social history of the Soviet Union. Fitzpatrick examined the education system of the Soviet Union during NEP and showed that higher education at first retained its pre-Revolutionary character in instructors, student body, and philosophy, but during the Cultural Revolution opened its doors to a new generation of Red specialists and administrators who would form the future Soviet ruling class. A more recent study on this theme is Peter Konecny, “Chaos on Campus: The 1924 Student Proverka in Leningrad,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 46, no. 4 (1994): 617-35. For a study of the NEP period generally, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918-1929* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992). On the subject of worker-peasant tensions, see Douglas Weiner, “Razmychka? Urban Unemployment and Peasant In-Migration as Sources of Social Conflict,” in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites (Bloomington: Indiana Univ.

mainly to Stalin by a variety of citizens, more or less literate, party and non-party alike, from disparate regions throughout the Soviet Union, and collected and stored in no particular order in the files of the Central Committee. They were written from 1923 to 1927, just on the eve of the Great Turn.<sup>5</sup>

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Press, 1991), 144-55. Other contributions to the same volume examining the working class include John B. Hatch, "Labor Conflict in Moscow, 1921-1925," Diane P. Koenker, "Class and Consciousness in a Socialist Society: Workers in the Printing Trades during NEP," and Wendy Z. Goldman, "Working-Class Women and the 'Withering Away' of the Family: Popular Responses to Family Policy." See also Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Ronald G. Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994); William J. Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987); David L. Hoffmann, "Land, Freedom, and Discontent: Russian Peasants of the Central Industrial Region prior to Collectivisation," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 46, no. 4 (1994): 637-48; Lynn Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987); and Mark von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990).

5. The letters used in this study are located in the Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI; the former Central Communist Party Archive in Moscow), Fond 17, the collection of the Central Committee of the KPSS. The majority of letters referenced herein are addressed to Stalin personally; when not, this is noted. The letters are hereafter cited by the acronym RGASPI, fond, opis, dela, and list. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the Russian are the author's.

No attempt was made to examine all, or even to make a statistically valid sampling of letters and appeals to the center during this period, since such a study would be well beyond the scale of this work. The emphasis here is not on a quantitative, but a qualitative study of the language and meaning embedded in appeals addressed to the party leadership, and specifically to Stalin, during NEP. Letters to other leaders or ministries, or to group-specific newspapers (for instance, those catering to professional organizations), might well yield a different perspective. The letters used here were collected in the confidential files of the party Secretariat, sometimes loosely organized by the type of complaint, sometimes grouped more randomly. In any case, the level of organization is low. Typed copies were produced for most of the letters; in some cases, these copies are side by side with the original. Random checks of the typed texts against the originals (when found) revealed verbatim reproductions, except for corrections in spelling (especially when the level of literacy made the original almost illegible). In no case did there appear to be any attempt to censor or delete material, even when letters were extremely critical of the regime or threatening in their tone.

The question of how the aspirations of a country's population connect with the agendas of political leaders and movements is highly complex. Determining the connection between political policies and popular desires is particularly problematic under a dictatorship. The purpose here is to show the connection between popular desires and agendas that later became policies of the Soviet government, to examine the messages to Stalin before Stalinism – that is, to establish the common junctures between popular grievances and the system that developed. It suggests that public and party sentiment influenced government policy and the formation of Stalinism in indirect but powerful ways.

Many useful studies based on letters and petitions to the center and related sources have focused mainly on the 1930s. See, for instance, Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s," *Slavic Review*, 55, no. 1 (spring 1996): 78-105;

What the appeals show is a profound sense of abandonment, anger, and sometimes violent sentiments – especially among key constituents such as party members and veterans but also among the society at large – over their disappointment at the failure of the government to deliver the communist utopia, or even to provide basic sustenance.

This essay shows that some of the messages directed to the center during the 1920s anticipated much of what later occurred under the so-called Stalinist Revolution, suggesting that the turn in revolutionary direction was fueled in part by forces outside the party elite. Appeals to the center show that radicalism grew after 1921 when the goals of the October Revolution were repudiated and Lenin essentially instituted a capitalist system with the New Economic Policy.<sup>6</sup> Alter Litvin recently noted that appeals sent to the center during NEP “up to a point may be seen as an expression of public discourse, a sort of dialogue with the state power,” a situation which changed by the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> Communication went both ways, at least in the early Soviet state when party leaders were jockeying for power. This study shows that the dismantling of the NEP economy and society and the institution of the Stalinist system were undertaken in part at popular request, a conclusion supported by

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Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997); and the several articles included in *Russian History*, 24, nos. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1997) edited by Fitzpatrick and dedicated to a conference held at the University of Chicago in 1996 on “Petitions and Denunciations in Russia from Muscovy to the Stalin Era.” In a study of the press during NEP, Jeffrey Brooks noted that the government considered letters to the editor “an accurate reflection of public opinion and [they] were frequently used to evaluate policies” (“Public and Private Values in the Soviet Press, 1921-1928,” *Slavic Review*, 48, no. 1 [Spring 1989]: 16-35). For the tradition of supplication in Russia, see Margareta Mommsen-Reindl, *Hilf mir, mein Recht zu finden: Russische Bittschriften von Iwan dem Schrecklichen bis Gorbatschow* (Frankfurt a. M.: Propylaen, 1987), 111-18. In his introduction to *Stalinism: Russian and Western Views at the Turn of the Millennium*, John Keep noted that a “veritable explosion of knowledge stems from the opening up of the former Soviet archives since 1991” which “tended to confirm what independent researchers had long suspected; for example, that the hyper-centralized administration creaked badly, or that there was a good deal of grumbling among the mass of Soviet citizens, which coexisted with genuine enthusiasm among zealots and those eager to rise up in the social hierarchy. Efforts made to establish the degree of support for Party policies among different segments of the population, on the basis of correspondence, petitions and official opinion surveys (*svodki*) are still in their infancy, but seem to show that the scale of disaffection was greater than had previously been thought” (viii). In the same volume (“Sources,” 3-31), Alter Litvin noted that various types of correspondence “which Soviet citizens sent between 1917 and 1927 to representatives of authority . . . up to a point may be seen as an expression of public discourse, a sort of dialogue with the state power,” while “[p]etitions submitted in the 1930s and later are quite different from those of the NEP era” (24).

6. William Chase called the NEP economy “semicapitalist” (*Workers, Society, and the Soviet State*, 299).

7. See note 5 above.

other studies on political evolution during NEP.<sup>8</sup> It raises the paradoxical question, to what extent did the party's relative liberalism during NEP, its apparent abandonment of socialism, itself contribute to the victory of Stalinism? In short, it suggests that Stalinism did not destroy the liberalism of NEP Russia, but rather that NEP's liberalism brought Stalinism about.

NEP was not merely an economic system. The climate of the 1920s of individualism and private enterprise permeated all aspects of society, as any Marxist would expect: economic relationships were reflected in social and cultural relationships and structures. In effect, with NEP, Russia was no longer communist. What this meant for average people was that the collective struggle became an individual struggle, just as in a capitalist state; individuals could not rely on the collective for protection, but were left to sink or swim on their own. Or, more precisely, the collective struggle became an individual struggle to gain admittance into the collective. This change in course dashed the expectations of those who saw communism as an antidote to all the evils of prewar Russia.

The basic structural problem of Russian society that originally precipitated the revolution was the huge gap that separated the elites from the masses of people, in political, social, economic, and cultural terms. Historians have long noted how this gap was reflected in the dual power arrangement that emerged after February 1917, with the Provisional Government as the official, liberal government on the one hand, and the soviets on the other.<sup>9</sup> Once they came to

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8. In an essay on the formation of the *Komsomol*, Matthias Neumann concluded that "the active and significant involvement of the *Komsomol* in the 'revolution from above' . . . raises the question of whether it was, in a sense, the failure of the first socialist revolution during the years 1917 to 1921, manifested in the implementation of NEP and the creation of a society full of contradictions, which made possible the launch and victory of the second revolution in the period 1928 to 1932. As has been demonstrated, the *Komsomol* seems to have played a major part in the formation of a social constituency for a revival of the class war. Could, then, the 'revolution from above' have been launched and have succeeded without this 'evolution from below'?" (Neumann, "Class Ascription and Class Identity," 190).

9. See for instance Leopold Haimson, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1917 (Part One)," *Slavic Review*, 23, no. 4 (Dec. 1964): 619-42; and idem, "The Problem of Social Stability in Urban Russia, 1905-1917 (Part Two)," *Slavic Review*, 24, no. 1 (March 1965): 1-22. Haimson suggested that the dual power that developed after the February Revolution only reflected "the deep divisions that separated the upper and lower strata of urban and rural Russia." This polarization ultimately led to the abandonment of a liberal solution to Russia's social and political problems and the Bolsheviks' ascent to power ("The Problem of Social Identities in Early Twentieth Century Russia," *Slavic Review*, 47, no. 1 [Spring 1988]: 6). The divisions to which Haimson referred were by no means exclusively economic. Disparity in levels of culture and education were equally important in determining social standing and prestige. Contradicting Marx, Lenin argued that the proletarian revolution would be easier to realize in Russia than in the more advanced Western countries precisely because the extremely low cultural level

power in October, the Bolsheviks were no more successful in closing that gap than the tsarist government had been, particularly after the introduction of NEP, that is to say, of capitalism and the increased disparity and insecurity it brought. Those particularly disaffected by the change in course were the party's most prominent supporters, such as rank-and-file communists, civil war veterans, and youth. Perusal of appeals makes it clear that competition for work and resources during NEP heightened radicalism and revived revolutionary sentiment.

Sources of discontent in letters and appeals written to Stalin in the mid-1920s fell mainly into the following categories: (1) party elitism, (2) bureaucracy and corruption, (3) lack of educational opportunities, and, most frequently, (4) lack of jobs and sustenance. Most complaints could be categorized in more than one area, since, for instance, lack of a job or educational opportunity could be and often was attributed to elitism, bureaucracy, or corruption of the party or government.

Supplicants attributed blame depending on their individual situations. Peasants generally felt at a grave disadvantage in receiving help or attention of any kind from the central government, insofar as they were not considered on an equal footing with workers. This complaint, along with the practical obstacles of rural existence in the quest for education and inclusion, formed the basis of many peasants' appeals. Workers, on the other hand, had been promised work and expected to contribute to socialist construction; but throughout the 1920s, work often was not to be found.<sup>10</sup> Unemployed work-

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of the Russian workers would make them easier to direct (Michael Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class*, trans. Eric Mosbacher [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984], 22).

The educated and cultural elite of pre-revolutionary Russia generally were included by Soviet historians in the "bourgeoisie," but this had become a resonant term of disparagement long before the October Revolution. See B. I. Kolonitskii, "Antiburzhuznaia propaganda i 'antiburzhuiscoe' soznanie," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, no. 1 (1994): 17-27; Eng. trans., *Russian Review*, 53, no. 2 (April 1994): 183-96, which traces the development of antibourgeois consciousness through the propaganda of all revolutionary groups in Russia, as well as general usage. However, Kolonitskii never addresses the issue of why the appeal of such propaganda was so strong, or why it formed the basis (according to him) of a sort of "social contract" between the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary parties on one hand and the masses on the other. Nor does he address why the political usage of "antibourgeois" developed into much more general pejorative usage among the masses. In a study on peasants' early efforts to understand and employ the language of the revolutionary parties, Orlando Figes observed that the revolutionary intelligentsia ultimately, and ironically, were forced to employ peasant language in their propaganda in order to get their message to the peasants ("The Russian Revolution of 1917 and Its Language in the Village," *Russian Review*, 56 [July 1997]: 323-45).

10. See the figures for and causes of growing unemployment throughout the NEP period in Chase, *Workers, Society, and the Soviet State*, ch. 4. Of course, "workers" and "peasants" were not mutually exclusive groups; indeed, in-migration from the countryside was a major contributor to the severe unemployment in major cities like Moscow.

ers were thus denied not just sustenance, but their very identities as workers and members of the proletariat. The irony of this dilemma was not lost on the unemployed themselves, an irony that became more bitter if they were also communists, or veterans, or both. Communists and Red Army veterans considered the government to be their government; they had fought for it and built it. In their indignant appeals demanding work or medical attention, they often addressed Stalin and the party leadership as comrades and equals.

Ultimately, as is apparent in the appeals sampled below, the frustrations that people experienced frequently led them to propose “solutions” of various kinds to eliminate perceived sources of frustration. These solutions often amounted first to identifying enemies and obstacles to individual and collective success, and then to proposing that the government remove or purge those obstacles or enemies.

The persistence of privilege and inequality made poor, disadvantaged, or desperate supplicants to the center wonder to what end the October Revolution had been fought. In a letter written in the mid-20s, a factory worker from Kiev summed up the situation in no uncertain terms. He complained to Stalin that, despite the revolution, social inequality continued to exist:

The worker went to the front to defend the interests of his brothers, but he still sees the bourgeoisie today, those who, at the same time that the worker was defending the interests of the masses, put on balls, feasted and drank workers' blood, and [even though] the revolutionary working class was victorious, the capitalist bourgeoisie lives. . . . As the bourgeoisie grows, so does the oppression of the working class. . . . No one is claiming that unjust laws are issued by the center . . . but why after ten years in power have they not eliminated inequality of rights among people? Why can one [person] eat, drink, promenade, and spend money on foolishness, and another not get enough to eat or drink? Why are the lowly left everywhere to fate? . . . Why are there so many hungry, cold people? . . . These are questions that trouble many millions of the masses. . . .

Ending my appeal I beg you to answer these burning questions, knowing that I appeal to an old comrade, to a former exile and prisoner, to a comrade, at the memory of whose name the whole proletariat brightens up and senses before them a solid future.<sup>11</sup>

This appeal suggests basic leitmotifs that run throughout appeals in the 1920s: discontent over a continuing lack of security coupled with intolerance

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11. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 514, ll. 198-203.

toward social inequality that would eventually form the basis for political action.

For many appealing to the center, the greatest threat to the country's external security lay in its economic situation. A lack of personal security enhanced a sense of the country's vulnerability. Conversely, a victory for one member of the proletariat certainly would improve the chances of victory for the Soviet Union as a whole over the forces of international counterrevolution. The following appeal from a 19-year-old nonparty trade union member from Odessa illustrates how individual and collective security could become conflated. The young worker was unemployed and requested the assistance of the Politburo to be admitted to the Red Fleet or Army. He stated:

I feel and believe that I have an . . . inclination [to follow] in the great teachings of Il'ich, and if you give me the opportunity I will gladly lay down my life and soul for the sake of the Soviet Union, which is the only one in the world; and it seems to me that in this country of free soviets work should be given to everyone who wants it. . . . I call out the slogan . . . of the politically-conscious unemployed for the strengthening of the economy and construction of the country of soviets, so that every citizen who desires it is given the opportunity to take part in the building of our country.<sup>12</sup>

The supplicant makes no distinction between his desire to defend his country and his desire to feed himself. Indeed, why should he? Such a conflation of interests need not be viewed as a betrayal of revolutionary goals. As the supplicant points out, contribution to socialist construction was predicated on the availability of employment in some capacity within socialist society. A request in this case for employment in the armed forces thus offered both the material security promised by the collective and security for the collective itself.

Throughout many appeals there runs a theme concerning a desperate need to be included in an increasingly exclusive socialist collective. That exclusion from the collective operated on both a material and an emotional level becomes clear in the following appeal. In May 1927 the Central Committee received an appeal, "or more precisely a huge request," from a *bezprizornik* (homeless person), an 18-year-old who had been orphaned at an early age. The supplicant "grew up in train stations," working at casual labor of various kinds to support himself, and saw that "everywhere [there was] injustice, everywhere the influence . . . of NEP." Eventually he found work in construction, and "began a new life, the life of a producer." But this newfound securi-

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12. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 515, l. 123.



ty and sense of purpose proved to be short-lived when he lost his job “because of politics,” apparently due to outspokenness over the factory administration’s policies on wage rates and distribution of work among *artels*. He was fired, and “the party cell could not do anything about it.” Following this, the author found himself once again on the streets, suffering from a deep emptiness:

Now . . . when I see a meeting, hear the “hoorah!”, then I am prepared to give everything to the masses, dissolve into them, tears uncontrollably well up in my eyes, but this dream [is encircled] cruelly by the deep root of bureaucratism and narrow-mindedness. Explain to me and help me so that this [dream] in my head will not be in vain, use me, for that I only need the minimum for life and nothing more.<sup>13</sup>

Notable here is the youth’s apparent willingness to fulfill whatever purpose the collective required, in return for a chance to survive. The appeal also shows how the loss of work and lack of inclusion caused not only material but also emotional distress.

Such a sentiment is ubiquitous among appeals from veterans of the civil war who express both indignation and incredulity at their abandonment by the government they fought to establish. Making the transition to the relative insecurity of civilian life during NEP was difficult for former soldiers. After the battles of the civil war had been fought and demobilization began in earnest, Red Army soldiers fell into sixth place in priority for food rationing. NEP signified a change not merely in the economic system but also in the state’s philosophy regarding the support it owed to the army that put it in place. Distraught over this change of philosophy, a former Red Army soldier from Nizhnii Novgorod whose monthly pay of 22 rubles was insufficient to sustain his family implored the leaders “to plot to fight nep and strangle it like a dog, so that my mother and sister do not die of hunger.”<sup>14</sup>

The apparent disregard on the part of the government toward its most ardent supporters caused extreme bitterness. One civil war veteran, an invalid with ten years of service in the army and a family of four, wrote:

My family and I live in inhuman conditions . . . but people are still deaf, the revolution still did not reeducate them. . . . It is not their affair if someone else is dying, their family enjoys well-being and it causes pain in my heart to see that.<sup>15</sup>

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13. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 518, l. 23.

14. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 517, l. 152.

15. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 517, l. 38.

The goal of the revolution had been to establish collective responsibility to care for the individual; the fact that his family's distress was of no consequence to society, despite his service to the revolution, was too much for the veteran to bear.

Similarly, a former Red Army soldier sent his demands to the central authorities in July 1927. After demobilization, he had been hospitalized for some time but was unable to secure a place in a sanitarium since he no longer served in the army. The soldier worked as a daily wage laborer in Moscow and for two months had been without work:

In connection with relatives, I have not had any since 1914. . . . I gave the best years of my life . . . but now have been thrown out on the street, no good to anybody. I only ask that I be allowed to exist. I need: 1. medical treatment. 2. means for survival. . . . I honestly fulfilled my duty until the last and correctly with every step [during the civil war]. . . . I am convinced and believed then and now that we always must defend [the revolution] against the white parasite.<sup>16</sup>

Note here the progression, common in many appeals, from distress over individual insecurity to the wish or demand to eliminate enemies. Unemployed party members and demobilized veterans were outraged to find themselves thrown on the labor market. More importantly, they deeply resented their perceived dependence on class enemies for work. In 1927 one party member begged the Central Committee

to answer my question – why . . . is it impossible for a communist to find work anywhere, and only go to meetings from which nothing good comes. I have been out of the army for six months and cannot find work anywhere. . . . I waited as long as I could, but now have to go to the nepman for work. Give me an answer.<sup>17</sup>

Along with anger and resentment, unemployed and abandoned communists and veterans often expressed shame over their situation. The more desperate supplicants became, the deeper their disgrace. A party member and civil war veteran, four times wounded during his service, wrote from Moscow in April 1927. He appealed, as many did, “as a communist,” hoping that the center would pay attention to one of their own, “with a request to give me proper advice on how to get myself out of this stupid situation.” The veteran and his family had no possessions to sell, and

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16. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 523, l. 199.

17. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 517, l. 83.

apparently to expect help was useless, since to the party I mean nothing. If some party member named Tosov kicks the bucket from hunger, in his place you can put anyone you like. . . . In fact I myself would not be here crying for help, but when you have a family and a hungry baby, you are prepared to do anything. I hope, comrade Stalin, that all the same you will give me an opportunity to escape from this situation.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in March 1927 an old revolutionary and party member from Voronezh guberniia appealed for assistance for himself and his wife. The communist had worked for many years in the revolutionary underground, and now he and his wife were both ill. Together they received a monthly pension of 11 rubles, 63 kopecks, and found themselves in “the most critical circumstances . . . things could not be worse.” A previous appeal addressed to the Central Committee produced a reply, but no help. The old communist now pleaded with Stalin personally “not to allow a party member to be subjected to the ridicule of the kulak element.”<sup>19</sup>

In another appeal, a party member from Saratov guberniia who had been a *batrak* (agricultural laborer) and served in the civil war contracted tuberculosis, and consequently found himself unable to work or to obtain support for medical treatment. He sent an astonished appeal to Stalin:

How offensive, how disappointing, when I was healthy – I was necessary, but when I became ill everyone turned away from me, did not even give me the means to live, I cannot work. . . . Surely it cannot be! Surely I have earned a cure from the government wherever necessary. Have I really earned this contempt, even though I lost my health for the sake of the workers? Such treatment of a worker is unfair. . . . It cannot be.<sup>20</sup>

Like the former *batrak*, many unemployed perceived their situation to be not merely shameful. Lacking work in a workers’ state almost suggested a lack of political reliability, and so unemployed supplicants often sought to convince the party leadership of their blamelessness, their willingness to labor. In 1927 a *komsomolets* (member of the Communist Youth League) from Rostov-on-Don appealed to Stalin for work. He had grown up in Penza guberniia, but during the civil war part of “Antonov’s band” attacked his village; while defending their home, his father was “cut to pieces with their sa-

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18. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 517, l. 57.

19. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 516, l. 249. Apparently, the government was not unwilling to extend assistance, but cautious in its response. The appeal merited a directive to the Voronezh *gubkom* to verify the author’s history (l. 247).

20. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 523, l. 203.

bers.” The youth became homeless and could not find work: “I want to be a worker, but no one will give me the opportunity.”<sup>21</sup> The contradiction between party propaganda and reality was apparent in the appeal of another komsomolets, a former batrak from Ukraine. He complained that in the old days, “when there were landlords,” one was at least “free to earn money.” But now, ten years after the revolution, there was no work to be had at all, and “to live without work is very difficult.” The writer went on to lament that “to beg for help is shameful, only ‘cripples’ beg, and everyone says that a healthy man needs to work, and not beg. But where do you find work?”<sup>22</sup>

Because Soviet society extolled work as a virtue, idleness, voluntary or not, was perceived as criminal, and not the least by the unemployed themselves. Those without work often felt that they were being punished for some unnamed crime, their outrage and desperation mixed with guilt over unknown transgressions. As Red Army units were disbanded, soldiers often perceived demobilization as a punishment for some error on their part.<sup>23</sup> Through its propaganda extolling the virtue of work and the evil of idleness, the party effectively foisted the responsibility for unemployment back on the unemployed – hence their guilt and shame.

The party’s inability to take effective action against unemployment was devastating. The unemployed and indigent commonly described their plight as *bezvykhodnyi* (hopeless). This was a far cry from what communism promised to the proletariat. Supplicants often indicated that their appeals were a last resort or that they were considering suicide to escape their desperation; their very lives depended on action from the center. Indeed, who else could they turn to, when local officials turned a deaf ear and thousands just like them were in the same situation? One *komsomolets*, a *bedniak* (poor peasant) and village correspondent from Smolensk guberniia, appealed for assistance. He was suffering from tuberculosis and expressed no hope of recovery in his current circumstances. For him, a “passionate [desire for] building Soviet power” was closely connected to escaping “cold, hunger, want [and] poverty.” He appealed to Stalin:

For a long time I have been a komsomolets and active within the school cell as head secretary. . . . Comrades! Now when I look over this appeal indifferently it is too, too painful. Sometimes I think about killing

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21. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 524, l. 145.

22. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 517, l. 186.

23. von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship*, 176.

myself, but . . . I still want to live, I am still only twenty-two years old . . . Comrade Stalin, to you I make my request.<sup>24</sup>

Conscious of their own superfluosity, unemployed supplicants often sought to convince their leaders – and perhaps themselves – that they possessed some worth in the future task of building communism. An old village correspondent asked Stalin in his appeal, “do you not need such a confidential correspondent?”<sup>25</sup> Other supplicants felt that if they could only establish some kind of personal connection with the party leadership, they could escape the killing anonymity. Thus, a *komsomolets* in Siberia who had formerly served in the Red Army and was now an “invalid of labor” requested only to see “the leader of the Comparty [Communist Party]” and meet with him, “to receive advice for further existence.”<sup>26</sup>

In order to find work or assistance of any kind, one had to warrant inclusion in the family of labor, and so supplicants who apparently did not belong to favored groups sought to show their merit. For example, an actress with the worker-peasant theater in Moscow appealed to Stalin for help by emphasizing her working-class status. She had been married to a student in a military academy, but they split up; she remained living in his dormitory for lack of other quarters. The actress had been rushed to the hospital by ambulance for an operation and upon returning found herself evicted. “That is the kind of country we live in,” she wrote, “where laborers do not have the right to a place to live!”<sup>27</sup> Notable here is the fact that the actress identified herself not as an artist, but as a worker. Only true workers had the right to appeal for assistance.

In the face of such insurmountable obstacles, many appeals to the center included “solutions” that are both implicitly and explicitly violent. Most who sought the intervention of the party leadership were jobless, homeless, starving, or frustrated in their quest for a future. In their desperation they sought causes for their misfortune in groups or individuals. Removing the immediate obstruction for one individual, it was argued, would advance the building of both the individual and the collective future. As one discouraged worker suggested, perhaps the solution was “a good fight.”<sup>28</sup>

Deciding against whom the fight should be waged depended on individual circumstances. For instance, there were numerous complaints about the pres-

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24. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 524, l. 157. On the high party debate in the 1920s over the role and function of the Rabsel'kor movement, see Hicks, “From Conduits to Commanders” (note 2 above).

25. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 517, l. 71.

26. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 517, l. 203.

27. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 523, l. 52.

28. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 521, ll. 218-20.

ence of kulaks in positions of authority from both peasants and workers alike. In February 1925 a former Red Army soldier and factory worker from Vladimir guberniia appealed to the center after he had been fired on the initiative of a certain Kasatkin who, he charged, was "an old black-marketeer and rural kulak" who "put the workers in chains." Among his other crimes, the worker related that Kasatkin regularly raped female workers and put them to hard labor or otherwise threatened them if they resisted. These facts were well known to the factory party cell and administration, he claimed, but nothing had been done. The worker and former soldier called on his comrades in the center to remember the days when together they defeated Wrangel and formed "close ranks." He requested that the center send a commissar to investigate, and remove this member of "our internal enemies."<sup>29</sup>

Derogatory terms such as "White guard" were used either literally to signify those who had fought for the Whites in the civil war or figuratively for anyone displaying counterrevolutionary behavior, qualities, or attitudes. A literal example occurs in the appeal of a Red Army soldier and party member who wrote to Stalin in June 1927 from the Crimea, complaining of the presence there of "parasites," those who collaborated with the Whites during the civil war and who now wanted to wreck the workers' and peasants' government. The Crimea apparently was filled with many such

scoundrels . . . the types who earlier worked with Denikin, Wrangel, Slashchev, many of them are still here. . . . I am always ready to die for the cause of the workers and villagers. Death to the parasites. . . . We will not allow blood, we do not want war, that is our slogan; but we are always ready to go to the defense of the worker-peasant power.<sup>30</sup>

The language employed begs the question, to what extent the reference to blood-shedding was merely rhetorical. In any case, the message was conveyed.

There could be many causes for the failure of the revolution to fulfill its promises to the working class. One could blame the Bolsheviks, or one could blame the Bolsheviks for allowing party and government ranks to be infiltrated by alien elements. If, as many supplicants claimed, the problem lay in corruption of the party, state, and military by individuals hostile to the goals of

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29. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 84, d. 859, l. 20. P. N. Wrangel was one of the White generals during the civil war. From the Baltic nobility, he fought in the Russian army in the Russo-Japanese War and in World War I. After escaping execution by the Bolsheviks he joined the White cause, capturing Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad), and became commander in the Crimea in 1920. He initiated land reform and evacuated 150,000 Whites after the Bolshevik victory in November 1920.

30. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 514, l. 81.

the party and the revolution – in a word, counterrevolutionaries – then the solution lay in a purge of the party and government to rid them of these enemies and opportunists.

Many supplicants thus suggested limited or widespread purges of the apparatus. In November 1924 a *komsomolets* from Briansk guberniia advised the center to undertake yet another purge of its ranks, since “in the period of time [from the last purge] a lot of garbage has collected that undermines further economic and industrial construction and creates ruptures in the village that are undesirable to us.” The supplicant could not give more detail in his letter, he explained, since he “would have to write a lot”; but he sent his “fervent greetings” to Comrade Stalin, adding that he would gladly travel to Moscow to fill Stalin in on the whole story, but lacked the means to do so. The *komsomolets* could only repeat his admonition that the party purge its ranks of the rubbish that filled it.<sup>31</sup>

A similar complaint about the riffraff ruining the party came in July 1927 from a militant communist from Odessa. The cadre had been working in a number of capacities since the civil war, including relocating workers into the vacant homes of the bourgeoisie. He was also involved in exposing “criminal elements” within the apparatus itself, with the result that those same elements began to conduct a smear campaign against him. The supplicant pleaded with Stalin to take the necessary steps to remove those elements in order that the party’s authority remain intact.<sup>32</sup>

Many appeals to the center implied that the enemies of the revolution were simply those who possessed a disproportionate share of wealth and privilege. Subjects often labeled as “bourgeois” anyone whom they perceived to be living off the labor of the working classes.<sup>33</sup> Such an indictment against parasites is illustrated in the appeal from a group of railroad workers from Tiflis who wrote to Stalin in March 1927 to request the return of their pension fund, which, the workers complained, had been invested in the construction of an oil pipeline that was “making big profits.” They feared that now their hard-earned money would become merged with the “millions [belonging to] bank-

31. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 84, d. 645, ll. 43-44.

32. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 518, ll. 172-79.

33. See note 6 above. For anti-Semitic aspects of conflation, see Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 209-10: “In many areas a NEPman had become synonymous with a Jew, and he was so treated in some of the belle-lettres of the period.” The conflation of those groups considered class enemies is further illustrated in an observation made by William Reswick, who worked during the 1920s in the Soviet Union for the Associated Press. Reswick defined the term *lishentsy* as “a newly coined name for Nepmen” (William Reswick, *I Dreamt Revolution* [Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952], 166-67); technically, however, *lishentsy* referred to persons deprived of voting rights and included all manner of class enemies and “former people.”

ers, factory owners, princes, landlords, speculators and, in general, robbers.” The workers argued that in contrast to the robbers’ money, their own savings had been earned through “physical labor of laborers,” and therefore “could not be considered stolen,” and so they requested the state to return it.<sup>34</sup>

This appeal is interesting on many levels. First, it is apparent that it was impossible for the workers to conceive that anyone could justly earn millions. That kind of money must belong to other people, to other people’s labor, and so was stolen money. According to this logic, and as the workers themselves point out, the only honest money was money earned through manual labor. The workers therefore list among dishonest wealth that appropriated by a whole range of people who were perceived as parasites – “bankers, factory owners, princes, landlords, speculators.”

Although they are not mentioned in this particular appeal, the intelligentsia or “brainworkers” often were classed among the parasitic elements of society, because they did not engage in manual labor, real work. Appeals that expressed anger against the intelligentsia, broadly defined, were common.<sup>35</sup> Such anger inspired an appeal in April 1927 from a group of *komsomoltsy* who wrote to Stalin concerning a number of questions “that interest not only us alone, but all the *Komsomol* masses and even the peasantry.” Their main complaint was over the government’s economizing regime under NEP. The *komsomoltsy* protested the fact that workers were being laid off from their jobs in the name of economic expediency, while the government bureaucracy “wasted resources to impossible lengths.” Moreover, the young communists

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34. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 516, ll. 268-69. For a discussion of working-class morality, see Mark D. Steinberg, “Vanguard Workers and the Morality of Class,” in *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity*, ed. Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 66-84. See also the article by Sarah Davies (“Us against Them: Social Identity in Soviet Russia, 1934-41,” in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick [London: Routledge, 2000]: 47-70) which focuses on articulations of “‘us against them’ in the sense of the ‘people’ (in various guises) against those perceived as power-holders,” and notes how “this dichotomous image of society (us being the lowly, them being elite) is common to many cultures and stretches back to ancient times” (48). Davies discusses both the moral (56-61) and economic (61-67) dimensions of this dichotomy.

35. T. H. Rigby noted that in the Soviet period, the terms *intelligentsia* and *sluzhashchie* converged in meaning to denote nonmanual workers, while the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia were distinct from the tsarist service bureaucracy (*Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R. 1917-1967* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968], 67). For a discussion of how the meaning of *intelligentsia* changed with and after the revolution, see Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917-1941* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), introduction. On the technical intelligentsia, see also Nicholas Lampert, *The Technical Intelligentsia and the Soviet State* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1979). On bridging the cultural gap between the intelligentsia and the masses and official Stalinist rhetoric on this in the 1930s, see Vadim Volkov, “The Concept of *Kul'turnost'*: Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process,” in *Stalinism*, ed. Fitzpatrick, 210-30.



complained, there were actually few genuine workers in the bureaucracy. Most egregious was the issue of compensation. How was it possible that white-collar specialists received up to 500 rubles a month, especially those who

sat on their chairs with their cup of tea and their French roll . . . and ran around with their briefcases (akh! actually, they do not run but ride in cars), why pay [them] money of workers and peasants – it doesn't follow. We believe that factory workers should be paid 100 to 200 rubles (since they do the work) and reduce the pay of "responsible and most responsible," paying them 40 to 50 rubles and that's it. . . . The Central Committee of the Communist Party should not just talk about these questions, but do something about them.

The *komsomoltsy* continued their lament, decrying among other things the state of education for peasant youth, and ended their appeal by condemning the bureaucrats who filled soviet organs and treated the peasantry in the same manner as did "the old Tsarist officials." Significantly, in order to clear up the situation, the supplicants recommended that the party should undertake "the most severe measures, even shooting [these bureaucrats], because the peasantry is very discontented with such occurrences."<sup>36</sup>

As many appeals illustrate, much of the popular resentment against the intelligentsia, the technical intelligentsia in particular, was based not only in disparity of value and compensation, but also in the frustration of personal ambitions. Popular resentment of specialists hinged on the perception that they were the new *bariny* (lords), the unofficial elite of the new society. Specialists perceived as barring communists from administrative posts were wreckers of socialism and thus labeled as counterrevolutionaries and spies. Individuals generalized their frustration to signify obstruction of communism or of the working class as a whole, or a conspiracy against the government. From the point of view of *vydvizhentsy* (workers promoted to administrative ranks) aspiring to take part in constructing socialist society, specialists who obstructed their advancement indeed struck a blow against the effort to build socialism.

The leap that frustrated supplicants made from specialists obstructing the individual to specialists obstructing the workers' and peasants' government and the building of socialism is illustrated in another complaint, submitted in March 1927 by a young researcher working for the paper trust in Moscow. This appeal was far more strident in tone than many, almost fanatical in its condemnation of specialists. The young inventor warned the government

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36. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 522, ll. 202-9.

about a conspiracy among the old specialists in his area, the object of which was to squelch the efforts of young researchers like him and so, indirectly, serve the cause of counterrevolution. He listed the reasons for their conspiracy, including a fear of losing their authority and having their own ways and contributions superseded by new ones. This alleged obstruction stirred the author to such an intensity of indignation and paranoia that he filled fully half the appeal in slogans and battle cries in an attempt to rally the leadership behind his cause, including "Down with the old! Build on the new!" The "new" included a project of the writer's own creation, a carton that allegedly would save the government huge sums but, the suppliant charged, was given short shrift by the specialists in question.<sup>37</sup>

In a similar vein, a peasant from Ivanovo-Voznesensk guberniia appealed to Stalin to help him gain admittance to a *rabfak* (workers' faculty or department in a higher educational institution preparing undereducated workers and peasants for coursework). It seemed that he had already taken the entrance exam but failed. The peasant's failure was based, however, "only on trifles, the [real] cause due to the presence of professor-bureaucrats. . . . I was weak on a few of the requirements. . . . I did prepare." Perhaps, as the aspiring student admitted, he was not first rate; nevertheless, he felt that he surely would have advanced but for the professors' unwillingness to allow him to do so. The suppliant had literary aspirations, and wished to speak with Stalin personally and "intimately" about the plight of the peasantry. Having been disappointed in his efforts to further his ambitions through the *rabfak*, the peasant youth apparently sought another route. He wished to know if he could work in some capacity in the Kremlin, as Stalin would not find "a better or purer proletarian, *bedniak* youth" to serve him. The suppliant thought that perhaps he could prove useful to Stalin in the future.<sup>38</sup> This urge to bring the revolution to a successful conclusion was summed up in another appeal from a communist from Sverdlovsk, who wrote to the leadership in January 1927 regarding the current debate within the party about the possibility of building socialism within one country. "It seems to me," the communist wrote, "that the time has come for radical socialist reforms."<sup>39</sup>

Some historians have argued that the Bolsheviks gained power in the October Revolution for two reasons: (1) they acceded to popular demands for control of the factory and the land, and (2) they sought to incorporate workers and peasants into the power structure. The two points indicated perhaps the key to success of Bolshevik propaganda: its elevation of working people to the preeminent social caste, making workers feel as though their contribution

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37. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 516, ll. 293-95.

38. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 524, l. 206.

39. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 521, l. 44.

to society was important, even vital to society's well-being.<sup>40</sup> A new system that gave average people a sense of their own importance might also, it was hoped, awaken a sense of responsibility to society as a whole – to the nation – that had previously applied to the peasant commune. In short, the new Soviet citizen would be invested, would become proprietor of the new socialist society.

Thus invested, the average Soviet citizen held enormous expectations for their own material and cultural progress after the revolution and civil war were over. The reality of NEP Russia fell shockingly short of satisfying those expectations. Russian social reality throughout the period was characterized by persistent and growing economic disparity, a crippling and ineffective bureaucracy, and intense competition for jobs and opportunities that fueled chronic and severe unemployment. The scarcity fueled the corruption of party and government. In addition, a host of social problems existed that the government had neither the resources nor the personnel to solve, including the growing numbers of homeless children who roamed the countryside and constituted a population dangerously at risk.

In an atmosphere of general poverty and disparity, competition for the opportunities that did exist was acute. Under such conditions, establishing an egalitarian society was not possible. Thus, as is apparent from the letters quoted above, social leveling of wealth and opportunity became a prominent theme especially among young communists who hoped to make something of themselves in the future. Hence the paradox: the have-nots wanted to level the playing field so that they might secure a place in the new elite. Only a small percentage of the population was going to be granted a chance to become "haves." Supplicants' appeals to the central party leadership spoke of too many competing for too few posts, opportunities, and positions. Crushed by competition and disparity, many supplicants sought a solution in drastic, even violent measures.

Peasants and nonparty citizens often blamed communist administrators for their dilemma. Party members sometimes accused nonparty specialists and administrators of obstruction and counterrevolution. Both party and nonparty members alike blamed personnel held over from the Tsarist system or White sympathizers for the corruption of the party and state bureaucracy. The com-

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40. Some recent studies discussing the purpose and use of Bolshevik propaganda include David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), where the author argues that before the 1930s there was no sense of a common Russian heritage because of regional variation, and that the formation of national identity was even hampered in the 1920s by a competing, internationalist, class-based consciousness (17). See also several essays in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, ed. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006).

mon denominator in a number of appeals is the identification not merely of an enemy, but of an enemy that must be eliminated.

To be sure, not everyone – perhaps not even the majority of the population – saw the solution to the country's persistent and growing socioeconomic problems in the purging of enemies. Supplicants' recommendations and critiques varied widely. However, society need not have been wholly dissatisfied with the conditions of NEP for a revolutionary mood to linger or reemerge. Unemployment afflicted communists and other theoretically favored groups within Soviet society, such as Red Army veterans. For them, unemployment and economic desperation were especially bitter, because they believed that they had earned special consideration and in too many cases were shown none. By 1927, one industrial worker in four in Moscow was unemployed. NEP-generated unemployment in the cities in 1927 had reached 1.5 million, or double the figure for 1924. Average workers, communists, and civil war veterans perceived as the decade wore on that the socialist society for which they had fought bore little resemblance to the society of reality, a realization that caused intense disillusionment, bitterness, and resentment. Such attitudes moved them to petition, calling for purges or worse – suggesting, in other words, a revolution from above demanded from below.

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